

DAMPAK KAPITALISME TERHADAP MASYARAKAT AMERIKA: CERMINAN DALAM THE GREAT GATSBY UNTUK KELAS ATAS DAN DALAM THE GRAPES OF WRATH UNTUK KELAS BAWAH

*Impact of Capitalism on American Society: Reflectors in The
Great Gatsby for the Upper Class and in the Grapes
of Wrath for the Lower Class*

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ABSTRAK

Dalam sejarah masyarakat Amerika, dasa warsa 1920 dan 1930 menunjukkan pengalaman yang saling berlawanan: dasa warsa 1920 yang makmur dan dasa warsa 1930 dengan depresi ekonominya. Perbedaan mencolok itu dikarenakan oleh sistem perekonomian yang kapitalistik dengan industri dan jasa sebagai unsur utamanya.

Industrialisasi, yang segera dimulai setelah berakhirnya Perang Saudara, menempatkan Amerika Serikat pada posisi terdepan di antara negara-negara maju awal Abad XX. Amerika menjadi pemasok utama bahan makanan, pakaian dan persenjataan bagi negara-negara Sekutu selama Perang Dunia I. Pasar internasional itu mendatangkan keuntungan berlimpah bagi Amerika.

Tentu saja, keuntungan itu mendorong tumbuhnya kemakmuran Amerika selama dasa warsa 1920. Kelebihan uang dalam masyarakat ditanamkan dalam perusahaan besar agar memperoleh keuntungan yang lebih besar lagi. Kerakusan semacam itu dilukiskan oleh Fitzgerald dalam novelnya, *The Great Gatsby*. Novel ini memperlihatkan bagaimana seorang Gatsby yang amat kaya tidak pernah merasa puas dengan harta bendanya. Mimpi masa remajanya itu, setelah tercapai, bahkan merangsang mimpi lain yang tak mungkin terbeli: memiliki kembali bekas kekasihnya, Daisy, yang sudah kawin dengan laki-laki lain. Mimpi inilah yang membawa bencana kematian amat menyedihkan bagi Gatsby.

Spekulasi berlebihan dalam pasar modal mengakibatkan merosotnya kepercayaan masyarakat, yang berarti merosotnya harga saham secara tajam pada tahun 1929. Dampak negatif jatuhnya harga saham itu mewarnai dasa warsa 1930. John Steinbeck, dalam novel *The Grapes of Wrath* melukiskan bagaimana para petani penggarap di Oklahoma diusir dan tedampar di Kalifornia yang mereka bayangkan dapat memberikan kehidupan lebih baik. Yang mereka jumpai di Negara Bagian itu sangat menyedihkan. Para pemilik perkebunan di Kalifornia

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menekan upah mereka hingga tingkat paling rendah karena membanjirnya tenaga kerja para petani pengungsian itu.

Kata kunci: kapitalisme -- dampak -- kelas atas -- kelas bawah.

INTRODUCTION

F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) was one of a number of American writers who witnessed great social changes caused by the high spirit of capitalism during the 1920's. *The Great Gatsby* (1925), his most successful novel, portrays how Jay Gatsby and the behavior of the society around him become "a heartbreaking case history... whose charm and energy are invested fruitlessly in an effort to achieve social position" (Lerner, 1957). Capitalism has made Gatsby very rich. But, wealth alone is not enough because, for him, what is more important is what that wealth can do to him. With money he expects to gain social status and the power to do anything he wants.

On the other hand, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) portrays capitalism and the miseries it causes more graphically and tragically than *Gatsby*. It shows how small tenant farmers, the Joads, because of the operation of capitalism in agricultural sectors, are dispossessed and must toil alongside thousands of unemployed migrants in Californian farms, which they hope will give them a better living. However, since there are no permanent jobs available, they move from one farm to another, only to earn lower wages; the farm owners gain more profits by minimizing wages, one of the production costs.

Even though the two novels talk about different experiences of people living in supposedly different historical backgrounds, they share something in common: treating society which "emerges from patterned, formal relationships among aspects of our experience" (Langland, 1984). And, this very experience must be regarded as parts of certain historical and cultural backgrounds (Abrams, 1981; Mizener, 1973; Langland, 1984).

The Great Gatsby represented, at least in part, the mood and manners of the American 1920's (Mizener, 1973; Cahse, 1957). Likewise, *The Grapes of Wrath* presents the rural issues of the 1930's (Covici, 1971). Consequently, this study tries to provide a more detailed observation on the shaping of the novel's themes formed by their "world view." This term is defined by Goldmann (198) as a *coherent and unitary* perspective concerning man's relationships with his fellow men and with the universe. According to Goldmann, "world view" includes the historical and social facts which become the totalities of ways of thinking in a similar economic and social situation imposed on certain social groups. In analyzing the two novels, one finds this statement conflating with parts of Abrams's mimetic orientation which defines art as essentially an imitation of aspects of universe (Abrams, 1976). Wellek (1956) underlies these two theories by stating that "the most common approach to the relations of literature and society is the study of literature as social documents, as assumed pictures of social reality" by which "literature can be made to yield the outline of social history."

ANALYSIS

The 1920's Upper Class

The 1920's was a decade when the United States was noted for its prosperity. The country's first involvement in international affairs by helping the Allies fight Germany was a success in terms of international and national economy. The rising demands for American agricultural and industrial products, especially from Europe derived mainly from the fact that most European countries needed several years of economic recovery and stability after World War I ended. As the supplier of a recovering European economy, America gained both the benefits from international commerce and the rapid growth of agricultural and industrial sectors at home. America was in the mood for business and "good business helped prosperity, and prosperity was good for the country" (Allen, 1959). This mood aligns with what Yale sociologist, William Sumner, says, "we cannot go outside the alternative: liberty, inequality, survival of the fittest; non liberty, equality, survival of the unfittest. The former carries society forward and favors all its best members; the latter carries society downward and favors all its worst members" (Cable, 1984).

The triumph of materialism and business values in the 1920's was just the change that American life needed. Wealth was very important in supporting the life of American society because "as American society is constituted - just possibly as any society is constituted- only wealth provides the conditions that make the full realization of life's promises possible..." (Mizener, 1973). And, in a business community like America in the 1920's, profit getting became a top priority because, as stated by Wright *et al.* (1963), "Profit for the company was a mark of success, a guarantee of security, and a fund from which larger salaries could be drawn."

This kind of profit-oriented businesses created new rich families during the 1920's. Unfortunately, such rich families like the Vanderbilts limited themselves to their own small social circles. In business centers like New York and Boston, such families began organizing their own weekends, dinners and balls in a very exclusive club called *Society*. They regarded themselves as "people-we-know" and the rest, especially those who were lower in status, as "people-we-don't-know" (Cable, 1984). Thus, infused with the values of materialism, most of the members of the Upper Class changed their behavior, excluding themselves from the general society.

In terms of politics, this rich circle was very influential due to its power in national economy. Jensen, in the "introduction" to Cable's *Top Drawer* (1984), says that in the "new, pushing, industrial United States, the centers of real power lay with these new personages and not with the shadowy officeholders in Washington." Eventually, excessive stock speculation ended the whole prosperous decade with the stock market crash of 1929. This brought about prolonged economic difficulties during the 1930's Great Depression.

The 1930's Lower Class

The suffering of American farmers had already begun in the 1920's even while businessmen and industrialists were enjoying the boom era. It was mainly due to farm overproduction beginning in 1914 caused by the widening of land acreage in response to European demands of staple crops during World War I. Wright *et al.* (1963) say that "After the collapse of the reconstruction boom in 1920, farm prices fell behind the cost of things the farmer had to buy." Meanwhile, for the sake of agricultural efficiency and more profitable agribusinesses, tenant farming system was no longer an option for people like the Joads.

Therefore, tenant farmers became "the unfittest" in the American competitive, *laissez-faire* economy. They had to leave for cities or Western plantations to get a job. But, when the Great Depression came, employment became a "dream" for these unskilled farmers. Thousands of unskilled people from both agricultural sectors, were moving from one place to another, trying to get a living.

On a national scope, the impacts of the stock market crash of 1929 were felt in every sector of the economy of the country. In the collapse of the stock market, corporations lost their surpluses; brokerage houses were no longer able to sell fast enough to cover their loans; banks were in turn unable to fulfil demand loans (Wright *et al.*, 1963). For reasons of efficiency, factories contracted productions and, consequently, threw workers out of their jobs (Chudacoff, 1981). Unemployment became a national issue and in such difficult situations, governmental aids were badly needed.

The government, through the New Deal programs, decided to aid some 5000 medium-sized to large businesses "in order to meet their pressing obligations, such as bond and mortgage interest or short-term debts." By doing so, the government expected "to preserve those institutions whose operation was essential to the public and to other businesses" (Wright *et al.*, 1963).

In addition to these economic problems, the government also faced the remaining social problems from the previous decade: "the prohibition problem, the gangster problem, the racket problem: as the Post-war Decade bowed itself out," (Allen, 1959). From the lessons of the prosperous 1920's and the depressed 1930's, "For the first time in American history men began to doubt the survival of American capitalism itself." (Mason, 1959). However, with the New Deal, the government "saved American capitalism" although did not "cure the underlying economic problems. It was the war that did that." (Hodgson, 1978).

The Great Gatsby: Impacts of Capitalism on the Upper Class

Even though a historian says that "Fitzgerald became the twenties and the twenties became a version of F. Scott Fitzgerald" (Kazin, 1985), it is important to know what he really did in viewing the decade, the 1920's, through his novel, *The Great Gatsby*. Through its characters -Nick, Gatsby, Jordan, Tom, Daisy, and even Wolfsheim- Fitzgerald mostly talks about parts of their

lives which are closely related to money and how to spend it to show to what class they belong.

Nick comes from a "prominent, well-to-do" family who gave him good education to start his life with. He leaves for New York "to learn the bond business." By so doing, he wishes to unfold "the shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Maecenas knew." He wants to be rich, although not necessarily as rich as J. P. Morgan.

With this kind of life history, Fitzgerald wants to show how great the impact of capitalism is on individuals. After being educated at Yale, Nick leaves the Midwest where his family lives and which "seemed like the ragged end of the universe." He goes to New York, where Wall Street is inviting young, ambitious men like Nick to share in the prosperity of the country. He is driven to the place where the power of capitalism -in the form of intermingling business between industries and services-creates most of the national fortunes.

Meanwhile, Gatsby is the son of "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people" and whose "imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all." He proudly lies to Nick that he is "the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West" and after the death of his family, "came into a great deal of money." Although Gatsby's story about his family is made up, by his thirties Gatsby has become very rich from the bootlegging businesses.

Again, Fitzgerald uses Gatsby to show what capitalism does to people. Gatsby becomes obsessed with using wealth to climb the social ladder. For him, the most important thing is to be wealthy and respectable and proud of all the luxuries he gains.

Similarly, this novelist uses Jordan, the golf player, to reflect another face of wealth obsession. She achieves fame and respectability as a gold champion by cheating. Becoming a famous golf champion means more advertisement contracts and money prizes.

Tom Buchanan, who comes from a very rich family, is another character who spends money carelessly to show how rich he is. When he married Daisy, he "hired a whole floor of Seelbach Hotel, and the day before the wedding he gave her a string of pearls valued at three hundred and fifty thousand dollars." (Fitzgerald, 1915). He is a person for whom money is a symbol of ease and pride.

Daisy Fay, then Buchanan, is clearly a figure of money-lust. Being "the most popular of all the young girls in Louisville," she marries Tom because he is very rich and famous as a football player. Her reunion with Gatsby is also stimulated by the fact that Gatsby has become very rich and she admires his riches very much.

Wolfsheim is the man who "made" Gatsby with all his riches and businesses. With the power of his money, Wolfsheim "fixed the World's Series back in 1919." So, Fitzgerald uses this character, and Tom, to portray how powerful money is with the immunity it provides to its owner.

All those attitudes are only possible in situation where individuals and wealth, when mingled together, become so arrogant. In such a capitalistic

system, wealthy people like Wolfsheim often use their power to evade the law. Anyway, the novelist Fitzgerald, at the end of *The Great Gatsby* concludes this materialistic mood by depicting Gatsby's tragic death. But, before that, Gatsby's career as a tycoon has also ended in a very lonely way: no more parties in his huge mansion. So, both the end of his career and his life are used by the writer of the novel to show that there is limit to any power.

The Grapes of Wrath: Impacts of Capitalism on Lower Class Americans

At the very beginning of *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck depicts the conditions in Oklahoma with its corn farming and, most importantly, its dust. Dust has resulted from "man's destruction of the grassland" for fulfilling their needs for food and, in larger scale, for farm products (Worster, 1977).

Cotton plantations operated by big companies had used up all the fertile layers of a huge acreage of land and prevented bigger trees from growing. What was left after the operation of such farming was poor land, with dust covering its surface, and strong wind that blew the dust away. The quality of the environment was not good enough for both farming and home. Steinbeck illustrates how "men and women huddled in their houses" because of the dust; and "when they went out, they tied handkerchiefs over their noses, and wore goggles to protect their eyes" (Steinbeck, 1939).

The poor, dusty land in turn decreased farm products. And, the tenant farmers like the Joads received fewer shares year by year. Worst of all, these poor farmers no longer can compete with tractors. They have to leave their small-scaled farms for a place which they consider to be more promising. California becomes the "promised land" for such poor, dispossessed farmers.

Unfortunately, capitalism operates differently from their expectation. As more migrant farmers enter the job market of California, wages become lower day by day. The more hungry migrants struggle for the same jobs, the lower their wages and the better for the plantation owners. By minimizing wages of cotton picking, the owners gain bigger profits. And, the Joads, not knowing what to do without a job in California, accept any jobs although only to receive a very small amount of wages each day. They are victimized by an economic system which they do not understand. Being unjust, the system results human beings no longer being treated as human.

CONCLUSION

Both *The Great Gatsby* and *The Grapes of Wrath* share something in common, that is, the theme of dream and defeat. This theme is developed very well through a vivid presentation of characters in the midst of their own specific societies: *The Great Gatsby* with the roaring twenties and *The Grapes of Wrath* with the Great Depression of the 1930's.

In Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* the theme of dream and defeat is personified in Gatsby's characteristic behavior. For Gatsby, becoming wealthy is one dream and the power wealth provides him is another dream. So, he

becomes very rich and buys all the expensive things he wants to have: his fine and big cars, a huge mansion, lavish parties and European-made clothes. But, all those things never satisfy him because, with the power of his money, he wants to regain Daisy from her husband, Tom Buchanan, who is also very rich.

Therefore, by the time the power of his money is no longer effective, there comes defeat, taking away his dreams altogether. Gatsby is defeated by his own excessive will in the form of the unlimited power of money he dreams about.

Similarly, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* presents the Joad's unfulfilled dream in the form of defeat. Being dispossessed is one defeat; the good life in California is one dream; and victimized by an unjust economic system in the plantations becomes another defeat. The desire that drives them to California is a dream about a good living, a safe society, and a stable family. But these dreams are not realized because the Joads do not understand that the Great Depression made capitalists be even more concerned about profit and how to repay the loans they had taken from the banks. But the severest defeat they experience is family breakdown and improper treatment they receive from the plantation owners.

Learning about the experience of other nations is as important as learning our experience. Therefore, it is possible for contemporary Indonesians to learn from the experience of American people during the two opposing decades: the prosperous 1920's and the economically difficult 1930's. Big businesses which began to operate effectively in the 1970's here in Indonesia have created new rich people. Being rich is not a sin, but realizing that money is not everything is difficult to do.

Therefore, money-lust is acceptable to the extent that others are still concerned. When one cannot control his own temper with his money, others will certainly become his victims. And, being rich in a capitalistic economy does not mean independence because one's riches are closely intermingled with others'.

The operation of big business sometimes causes ordinary people to suffer from being dispossessed. Their land is taken by the businessmen offering very low prices. The cases of Wonogiri southern coast in Central Java and Kacapiring in West Java show how big companies become so arrogant with their financial power which often results in people losing their land and homes. The experiences of people like the Joads show that we must prevent this from happening in the future, because land issues are closely related to home and life in Indonesia.

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